

Unfettered

by Perspicacity

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Summary: A small change in Stoick's reaction to his son's betrayal dooms Berk and sets his son on a path of self-discovery. Anti-hero Hiccup.

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How to Train Your Dragon is a film by Paramount Dream Works Animation and was based on a story written by Cressida Cowell. This is a piece of derivative fiction written for fun, not profit. I make no money off this endeavor and I do not own the characters or story.

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Luckless lowers the cylinder of rolled brass with hand-ground lenses. He calls it a looking device and it's another of his many inventions. Behind, his second in command signs helms alee by raising a white, triangular flag just visible against the twilight dusk. The crew races to adjust the jib and the longship lists, as do the ships behind him. Luckless leans into the turn.

He subconsciously monitors its motion in the water and his mind catalogues the alternatives. Perhaps fins on the sterns would avoid some of the drift? It's something to consider another day. Still, they are functional enough. Unlike other Viking raiders, these ships can tack the hard winds that blow out from their adversary's ports this late in the season and blunt the natural defenses that would otherwise sap strength from would-be invaders as hard rowing leaves limbs spent and unable to heft their axes. The riggings are one-of-a-kind, enabling nimble seamanship the likes of which the rest of the world would not see for centuries. Lines groan as the sail

luffs, then takes tension as they tack. Behind, other ships wreathed in shadow mirror their movements.

A last turn and the village will meet its fate.

His is the flagship, tall and sleek, possessing the forbidden beauty of implements of war: a fine sword, all angles and implication; the gentle bend of a recurve bow; the spritely curves of a shieldmaiden. Above, the black sail furls beneath a charcoal sky and suddenly she's _fast _again and the captain tastes speed he has nearly forgotten from his youth.

Ashore, nestled in the crease between vast slabs of stone, are wooden structures grey from exposure, their tall, spiny roofs jutting upward, a row of Nadder barbs. The town sleeps, a weary repose before cold winds seep into the cracks and whisper inevitable drafts of seasonal torment. The mid-autumn gusts will evolve into winter gales and vitality will be bleached from those who stand apart from the tribe. Dry bones. Luckless knows, having felt the cold and embraced it as one might a lover, his soul once having been imprinted with the "hospitality" of their prey. This purge will be a mercy.

The last long days of summer have waned, yet to the captain, today is a lifetime. He holds up a fist and his second raises a new flag: Two squares. Sails are secured and oars dip into the sea, turning their approach from a gentle windglide into a short palsy of lurches and splashes and grunts.

Luckless paces the foredeck, his armor creaking. Dragon skin wraps his torso. Though not as large as the man he once called Father-few can make such a claim-he's been marked by the Gods, though blessing or curse is still unknown. His face wears a reddish beard, a reluctant nod to advancing age, and his left cheek is marred by deep ribbons of scar, patches of shiny skin that trail beneath the neckline of his cuirass. His eyes, cold as the dawn, glint at the shore and he has the coiled tension of a Monstrous Nightmare about to strike.

The sky explodes with a white lance of immortal fire; Thor favors them this eve. The men murmur at the signs. And then a clatter of something heavy, an unsecured axe perhaps, rattles on the deck. Luckless indeed, how quickly advantage is lost. The captain curses as a watch fire flares on the shore, its brilliant yellow flame searing the eyes of those who approach. A watcher shouts a cry and a flare streaks above. More shouts are heard as men race from their houses, weapons in hand, and the silhouettes of the longships become visible.

"So be it! Woken throats bleed just like sleeping ones.!" Luckless says and his men respond.

"Faster!" Luckless's second yells.

The captain's body tenses in anticipation of the assault. Their ship surges ahead of the others and he moves to just behind the keel, his sword drawn and hungry. He would have first blood this night. He had sworn once that Berk would burn one day and that day is nigh.

* * *

><p>It's sunny on the day that it all comes to a head. Despite a lack of success in the latest campaign to find the beasts' nest, spirits are high: the raiding party has returned and the Chieftain's inutile son has undergone a miraculous transformation into something resembling competence. The Gods bless them, surely.<p>

And then there was Hiccup's failed attempt to effect change in the ring as he nearly dies and his best friend and dragon, Toothless the Night Fury, is captured. His father's wrath at the boy's betrayal is horrible to behold.

"You've made your choice. You've thrown yer lot in wi' them," Stoick the Vast says to his diminutive son. The man's emotions, true to his name, are rarely so apparent as they are now. Hiccup has roused in him a terrible fury, the kind that normally precedes bloodshed.

"Dad, please, you have to listen to me-this isn't a fight you can win!" His father's is a fool's errand, one that can only end badly with the deaths of those Hiccup holds dear.

"You're no son of mine," the man says in a tone that brooks no further discussion and he squeezes through the doorway. The massive door slams shut and the weight of Hiccup's decisions, of his failed and ultimately futile attempt to get the village to see the dragons as more than enemies, settles onto his shoulders like the armor he's too weak to bear.

And then the door bangs open again and his father squeezes through with a look of resolve on his face. He holds a heavy chain in his hand.

"Um, dad? What are you going to do with that?"

"On second thought, I'm not about to leave you on your own like this, not after wha' happened the last time I left."

Hiccup tries to get away, but a massive hand clamps over on his shoulder and he's bent into his bindings. A metal band snaps tight about his neck and the rough edges of the coarsely filed iron bite into the boy's skin and chafe his neck. The lock mechanism ratchets closed and he is trapped. Hiccup sets his jaw and glares back at the other man. For the briefest moment, Stoick is struck by the boy's demeanor, the well of strength that he shows. A horn's blare interrupts his thoughts, however.

"Right. I'll see about setting you free when I return," he says in a gruff tone and he drives a spike through one of the links of chain and deep into one of the ceiling rafters, thus trapping the boy. The man clutches the helmet on his head to duck under the lintel and squeeze through the doorway. "_If_I return," he adds needlessly.

He slams the door behind him hard enough to bend the hinges and the door leaves open a crack at the top, sending a sliver of light in the room. Hiccup immediately sets to work on the chain, tugging at it, working to see if he can somehow prise out the spike, but it's to no avail. He looks about for something to lever himself free, but he finds nothing in the small radius that he can access. Defeated, he sags to his knees.

"And I'll be here, _maybe_," he says to nobody. His chest feels tight as he gazes at the sliver of light on the floor. In time, it lengthens and turns red with the late afternoon sun. Then it widens and a familiar silhouette appears on the floor. He looks up and sees Astrid walk toward him, her axe in hand. Hers is a girl's walk-she's too young for the swarthy, lusty saunter of a shieldmaiden-but it stirs something inside him nonetheless. Her golden hair, tied into a wide braid, is accented in the colors of the sunset and despite all the horrible things happening, he feels a longing for the feeling of her arms about him again, of her lips on her cheek again.

"It's a mess," she says, meeting his eyes. She looks as worried as he feels and the normally unflappable girl's voice quavers just a bit. "You must feel horrible. You've lost _everything_-your father, your tribe, your best friendâ€|"

"Thank you for summing that up," Hiccup replies, falling back on his trademark sarcasm. He pounds a fist into his hand. "Why couldn't I have just killed the dragon when I found him in the woods? It would have been better for everyone."

"Yep, the rest of us would have done it. So why didn't you?" She peers at Hiccup, who remains silent. Impatient, she steps in front of him and looks down, meeting his eye-she's still taller than he, though not by a lot. Hiccup gets the feeling that she's searching for something in his expression. "Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I couldn't-I was weak, okay! I wouldn't kill a dragon!" Hiccup shouts.

She thinks about calling him on the discrepancy-there's an ocean of difference between 'couldn't' and 'wouldn't', one being a sign of frailty and indecision; the other, of strength. But she gets distracted by the chain about his neck and she's stricken by the utter hopelessness of the situation: the village fleet sails toward certain doom and this boy, the cleverest among them, is trapped, unable to fulfill her fool's hope, that he might somehow come up with an idea, an unorthodox one perhaps, to save the day.

The chain about his neck reveals the bitter truth, though. They're still children, weak, naïve, and unblooded by battle. What could they hope to do? What business is it of theirs to interfere in their parents' war? It's futile, she realizes, to worry over what could have been.

"If you were free, you'd probably go off and do something stupid, wouldn't you?" She asks, scuffing her fur-lined boots on the stone floor. She already knows his answer.

"Or crazy." Hiccup says with a shrug. "Probably both."

"Yeah. Good that your father's put an end to that, right?" She laughs weakly, reaching up with the back of her hand to rub her eye. She's absolutely not crying, though. She never cries.

"Right, my father." Hiccup fixes his jaw and turns away from her, a motion that causes the chain to clink on the stone floor. "I have no father."

* * *

><p>A bank of clouds masses that evening in the direction of Dragon Island and an icy wind blows hard. It's an ill portent, one that leaves the entire village uneasy. Hiccup can only watch from afar as lightning illuminates the clouds. Their fate is in Thor's hands now and the God of Thunder favors the intrepid. Hiccup only hopes it's enough. His calloused hands itch with the feeling that he should be out there doing something. He knows in his heart that if he could just get free, he could at least die well, fighting to save friend and village. But his father had bound him here, away from his tools and gadgets-Loki's handiwork, as the man had said on more than one occasion.

Hiccup's thoughts turn to Toothless, the only one who had ever truly accepted him, who had sacrificed for him. His one and only friend, snatched from him because of another failed Hiccup the Useless plot. He thinks of their last flight, and of the time Astrid had spent with him that day. How had he ever deceived himself in thinking that she was different? She never liked him, as evinced by her reluctance to disobey the elders and fetch even one of Hiccup's tools. And that look of pity she had given him? Pity! He still grimaces at the memory.

There's a brilliant flash of lightning and he falls to the floor as if a giant weight were crushing down on his chest. He's overcome by a sudden, staggering sense of loss. He knows in his bones, spindly though they may be, that the Gods have judged and found him wanting, that those closest to him have suffered. He feels their manifold disappointment creep into his soul, icy poison mirrored by the disgust he feels for himself.

"Sorry I couldn't be there for you, buddy," he chokes out to his friend, wherever he is. Despite an irrational sliver of hope that somehow his dragon made it to safety, his heart begins to harden that night in the uniquely Viking way. He finds himself humming a song.

_Through bloodshed, strength. _

_Through grief, strength. _

_Through misery, strengthâ€| _

Strength. Hiccup swears to himself that he would never again allow himself to be weak.

* * *

><p>The ships return, broken, with masts snapped. Twelve had flown from the harbor borne on favorable winds and optimism. Four had returned beneath black clouds and storm's swell. A simmering anger has taken the village. Tuffnut, one of his fellow Dragon School classmates, had come by to taunt Hiccup with the knowledge that Toothless had indeed drowned, pulled to the ocean's floor with his father's flagship. The news had hit Hiccup harder than even knowing that his father had perished in the raid. Alone and wet, Hiccup sits upon the sill of the only window he can reach, bound as he is. He watches the baggage train trudge up the footpath from the docks. He'd help too, but hey, you know, chained up like a dog?<p>

That night at The Thing, he sits before them in the Great Hall as a lesson in failure and the price of free-thinking. The story of their ill-fated battle is told, tapestry of spun sorrow, a ragged chapter added to the saga of endless war. He schools his face to be emotionless as they're told of how the man who was once his father and Gobber, his mentor and in many ways more of a father, had charged the behemoth now called the Green Death to distract the beast and buy with their blood a few precious moments for the others.

Goblets are lifted to honor the fallen and mead is choked down amidst prayers for their souls. Hiccup neither asks for nor is offered any drink. He is anathema. He glances about the room as the others affect their grief in their own ways. Those who were once his friends stand together. Fishlegs looks into his cup, hoping to find wisdom there. Snoutlout scowls back at him, his burly arms folded. The Viking youth had lost his father, Hiccup's uncle, in the raid. Ruffnut and Tuffnut make rude gestures. Astrid looks broken, a shell of the girl he knew and, for a time, thought he loved. From her parting words and actions, he knows that she has chosen the village over him. Always the perfect Viking, the very best of all of them, she's another to whom he must harden his heart.

He finds his mouth dry and it's suddenly hard to swallow as he knows what comes next. The vote is counted and the outcome is as inevitable as the Winter gale.

Moments later, Hiccup is unceremoniously heaved from the Great Hall. He stands amidst cries of anger and gathers the chain, still attached to his neck, in his arms. And then he runs as the stones begin to fly.

"Begone, scourge!" He ducks behind the corner of a house as a loud crack sounds behind him—a stone has struck the house. He sprints up the twisted path. Uphill. He has to get to high ground if he hopes to lose them.

"Worse than useless!"

"Leave us, coward!" A round, flat stone smacks him in the back of the thigh, causing him to stumble and drop a length of the chain. It drags on the ground, slowing his gait as he staggers, but he pushes on. He must.

"Traitor!" Another smites his ear, causing his head to ring, and he begins to see double. But he keeps going.

A few younger Vikings, uninjured from the assault, give chase after the adults have given up the game. One, the tall, blonde Viking who had delivered the ill news about Toothless, manages an expert throw that cracks Hiccup's collarbone. Ruffnut, the Viking's twin sister, laughs derisively as Hiccup stumbles over the edge of the ridge, his chain catching on some of the stones. It pulls tight and his neck seems to stretch farther than it should. For once in his life, Hiccup is grateful to be small. Blood weeps from beneath his jaw where the edge of the fetter has bitten into his flesh. It soaks his shirt.

His body hangs for a moment and then Hiccup grasps the chain with his good arm and tries to swing across the ridge toward the other side. He doesn't quite make it and flops back against the stones, jolting

his injured shoulder hard. He steels his jaw and pushes harder this time against the cliff face with his feet. He swings out and back, pushing off with his feet again, swinging higher. He bites his tongue as another rock drops on his head from above. He's almost thereâ€¦ Got it! He grasps a gnarled tree root on the other side of the ravine and the sharp pain in his wounded shoulder makes him hiss. The boy hauls himself up and he stands facing his peers, a deep ravine between them, but spanned by the chain, which stretches to the other side.

"I'm going," he says, his voice sounding young, even to himself, and he deflates a bit, gesturing to the chain. "Justâ€¦ let me go, please?" Another day, he might have said something sarcastic, but now he just wants to be gone, to leave this all behind. Ruffnut picks up the other end of the chain and grins nastily-Hiccup knows that she's going to yank it and try to drag him into the ravine-but Astrid grabs it from her.

"Hey, give that back!" Ruffnut says, shoving the younger girl.

A glare stops the tug-of-war and Astrid, who once owned Hiccup's heart, looks across at him. Uncertainty. She's working up the mettle to say something and they stare at each other for a long time. Hiccup almost sees tenderness in her expression, but it could be his imagination and, nevertheless, he tamps those feelings as quickly as they come. She opens her mouth, but stops herself. She starts to speak again-and then Snotlout farts audibly.

"What, I had cabbage, okay?"

She turns to larger boy, then scowls and throws the end of the chain to Hiccup. Hiccup gathers it up and runs as if Loki's hounds were after him. The last thing he wants is to see that she truly cares for him, or for her to see his tears.

* * *

><p>Through misery, strength.

That night, shivering beneath a mound of damp pine needles under a clouded sky, Luckless, as he calls himself now, swears to that one day he would be stronger than all of them, that if he ever were to return, it would be to put the place to the torch.

He will never again allow himself to be vulnerable, not again. He would forge his grief and heartache into strength and wreak a terrible vengeance upon those who had slain his best and only friend, who had spurned and mocked him, who had made him the avatar of their own failings.

Berk will burn one day. He would see to it.

To be continued...

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><p>As always, thanks to Alpha Fight Club for their help. The story started after I caught the film with my son and I was left wondering what it would take to turn Hiccup into a dark, sarcastic antihero.<p>

End
file.